

The Church Executive as Disciple: Some Personal Reflections (Or Is It a Confession?) With Help from Matthew 10:38-39 and 11:28-29

I. Diagnosis

A. Aspiring to follow

When I was a junior in high school, my parents asked me if I really wanted to be a pastor. After several days of thought, I found myself thinking, if the story of what God has done in Christ is true, it is worth staking my life and my vocation on that truth. In a sentence, that thought has carried me to this day.

True enough, when faced with the possibility of this particular calling, my response was less than enthusiastic; I had come to know something of the nature of the bishop. But once I was called to this office on occasion I found myself thinking, "This isn't such a bad thing. Some people think I gifts for this office. They want to know what I'm thinking and what we should do and I'm pleased to tell them and, actually, to have them listen. In addition I get a credit card. I think I can do this."

B. But I'm not too big on losing, or dying

to myself for that matter

As I spend time in this office, I find myself having second thoughts. I have to use all the gifts that I have but where is it getting me? A number of congregations remain in conflict despite the best efforts of my staff. Many congregations have little sense of mission. In others, I wonder about whether or not the Gospel is being preached. Some of the most difficult stuff relates to the necessity of responding to pastoral misconduct. Others engage in the misconduct but I am the one required to respond and then I'm blamed. In such moments trust is absent. At one point I find myself saying to my family, "There is something in me that is dying."

C. God, you are killing me

In the stress of recent years, I have been required to do any number of consultations with unhappy congregations. For almost 14 years, I and the staff have spent hours developing relationships, stressing the centrality of the Gospel for mission and ministry. At this point all that work sometimes seems to be in vain. I point to the centrality of the cross, work to be an empathic listener but am called to participate in conversations in which my references to Christ are made akin to "talking like a politician." I am called to respond to slander to which nothing that I can say is adequate. I cry out one evening, "God you are killing me."

II. Prognosis

A. "Come to me"- a Word of Life

On the way home after one such meeting, I called a pastor who had sat in silence throughout the evening. In sorrow, I asked,

“Can I meet with you tomorrow? I need to know what happened. What am I doing? Where am I failing? As we talked the next morning I spilled my heart. He listened and then recalled for me the story of the crucified and risen Christ who died and rose for me, who called me. He anointed me with oil and pronounced forgiveness.” Other words came to mind. “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls.”

B. Found

To know myself to be carried by Christ to discover again the identity bequeathed in baptism, to receive the gift of peace, to find the space for self-forgetfulness. It is to learn again what it means to come and follow, to live by faith. In such moments I find myself grateful for the way in which the Holy Spirit uses others to tell the Story, to embody Christ, to carry me,, to nurture my faith through their prayers, their gifting me with the Body and Blood of Christ, by their embodiment of Christ.

C. Empowered to take up the cross

Given the nature of sin in others and in myself, obstacles, burdens, suffering is inevitable. When by the Spirit of God I catch the Gospel I am freed to follow and to point to the One whom I follow. That means going into the hard places in the world, in the church and in the lives of the baptized people of God. It means being freed to be a sign of and participant in God's in-breaking reign in Christ Jesus, wherever that leads. Better yet, my eyes increasingly are open to see the manner in which that in-breaking reign is happening in the lives of others, in congregations and in Christ's church.

A Parting Comment: I don't die easily. God is still very much at

work putting me to death, joining me to Jesus' death and resurrections, and by the Spirit of God bidding me to come and follow. I don't expect that to end for a bit.

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